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20 Years Later, FBI Still Keeps Secrets on King

Civil rights leaders are planning to commemorate Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s epochal 1963 march on Washington with another march on the nation's capital Aug. 27.

Undeserving of emulation—but not easy to forget—was the FBI's march on the march on Washington. The late J. Edgar Hoover's agents dogged the footsteps of King and his associates, bugged them and tapped their telephones, squandering millions of the taxpayers' dollars on this disgraceful surveillance operation.

Now, 20 years later, tens of thousands of documents—perhaps hundreds of thousands—relating to the King family and other civil rights leaders, as well as to the historic march, are locked tight in the FBI's files, unavailable to researchers, historians and the public.

The existence of the FBI's voluminous files on King was discovered by Harold Weisburg of Frederick, Md., an indefatigable researcher on American political assassinations. He obtained a 404-page partial inventory of documents that are stored in 59 FBI field offices across the country. A single entry in the inventory could refer to one page or a thousand pages of hidden material.

The inventory for the New York City field office is instructive. It gives an indication of the staggering amount of material on King that sits under lock and key in FBI files.

The inventory takes up 15 pages of index, and mentions "100 volumes" of unreleased documents. The general estimate of a "volume" is 200 pages, though it could run from six pages to several hundred.

The New York listing has 2,610 entries on a single King aide. The material includes formal and informal FBI memos, logs and reports of physical surveillance, teletypes, informers' reports, newspaper clippings and copies of documents in the files of other field offices.

Much of the FBI material is classified and is still withheld because of "national security." This was a favorite Nixon-era device used to hide information that might embarrass the federal government, often when there wasn't the faintest connection to the nation's security.

Other data are being withheld by the FBI, even in the face of litigation, on grounds that they were supplied by confidential informers whose identities must still be protected. But after 20 years the informers who are still alive could be protected easily by simply deleting their names or other identifying hints.

Oddly enough, there's a whole raft of King material that would be freely available at FBI field offices, but only if someone knew specifically what to request. And thousands of documents are already open to inspection in the FBI reading room.

In fairness to the FBI, employes spent hours trying to sort out the facts on the unreleased material for my associate Les Whitten. But they admitted that they have no idea—even to the nearest hundred thousand—how many documents remain hidden on the most influential black leader of our time.

FTC Fripperies: Although drastic budget cuts have caused retrenchment in some federal agencies, they haven't discouraged some high Federal Trade Commission officials from spending heavily to redecorate their private offices.

Chairman James Miller spent more than $9,000 gussying up his office from October, 1981, to May, 1983. Among the items he couldn't do without were lamps, a refrigerator, some new secretarial chairs and new table tops.

Executive Director Bruce Yandle outdid his boss. Since joining the FTC in May, 1982, he has run up almost $20,000 in office refurbishing bills. An agency spokesman explained that Yandle's office had been occupied previously by the same person for five years and needed repainting.